

THE BATTLE THAT SAVED TEL AVIV

Turning Point in Israel's War of Independence

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"HALLO—Hager—Boaz—Shamir—one-five: Hallo—Hager—Boaz—Shamir—one-five . . ." a monotonous voice kept droning through the wireless. The girl operator at the Givati Brigade's headquarters recorded the cable mechanically. "Urgent message—the lookout notifies. . . ." A young orderly took it to the CO's room. One message out of many.

In the brigade commander's room, at a table covered with maps, sat a light-haired man with blue-gray eyes and a nose like an eagle's beak. He looked very tired as he read the message: "The lookout at Nizanim reports: two hundred Egyptian motor vehicles have passed in a northerly direction. . . ."

The messages came in one by one. The Nizanim lookout reported again: Four hundred vehicles have passed. Six hundred. Eight hundred. A thousand. Twelve hundred. Fifteen hundred Egyptian motorized vehicles have passed along the road in a northerly direction. The lookout from Gan Yavneh reported: Three hundred motor vehicles observed on the road proceeding northwards from Isdud. Five hundred. Eight hundred. Tanks. Bren carriers. Heavy armored cars. . . . The commander closed his eyes, burying his face in his hands. He needed no map. He knew that the

THIS account of one of the most important of all episodes in Israel's War of Independence, pieced together months after the battle, was written by a man who was himself an immediate participant, fought through the Palestine war as a corporal in the famous "Samson's Foxes" jeep commandos of the Givati Brigade, and was seriously wounded in the abdomen and arm by machine-gun bullets. The book he wrote afterwards, *Bisdot Pileshet 1948* ("In the Fields of Philistia, 1948"), has gone into five editions since it was published in Israel in June 1949. The material we publish here is excerpted from that book. Mr. Avnery was born in Germany in 1923.

distance from Isdud to Tel Aviv was only twenty miles as the crow flies. The door opened. A short, plump man came in: the brigade chief of operations.

"I've seen them. More than a thousand motors north of Isdud." He spoke nonchalantly. That morning he had been at the front to check up on the lookouts' reports with his own eyes. A tremendous Egyptian force was advancing on Tel Aviv.

For a moment the two men looked at one another. They were very different, almost opposite types. Shimon Avidan, the brigade commander, was sensitive, nervous, reticent, a born fighter, with a turbulent past, head of an anti-Nazi underground unit, then commando leader and Palmach man. His chief of operations, Meirke Davidson, was a kibbutz member, sociable, cool-headed, powerful and energetic.

What lay between the Egyptians and Tel Aviv? Almost nothing. Two companies armed with rifles, light machine guns, and Molotov cocktails. What else? A bridge north of Isdud that they had blown up the night before last. What else? Four fighter planes that had just arrived from abroad and were still unfit for use under the conditions of the country; they had not yet made their test flights.

FOUR airmen stood on the flying field gazing at the fighter planes, which mechanics had just finished assembling. Their engines still had to be tested. Suddenly an infantry commander appeared. They did not know his face, but his name was familiar.

"Boys," he said, "you have to get up in the air."

The four stared at him in astonishment. He was not their commanding officer, and a plane that had not been properly tested was unfit for action.

"Your planes are all that can save Tel Aviv and the State of Israel. The enemy is advancing on the city. Except for you there's nothing left to hold them up."

The infantry commander's eyes were even more eloquent than his words. The flyers got into their planes, waved, and took off. Three came back.

THE Egyptian columns had been stalled north of Isdud by a blown bridge. Their officers were cursing at the delay. All of a sudden airplanes appeared, and the troops scattered. Bombs fell and though they scored some hits, there was little damage.

Where did the Jews get airplanes? This was a new factor that had not been taken into account. The Egyptian was a cautious fellow. He had been trained in a British military academy that taught him to think along orthodox lines. Precious armor must not be risked. Therefore they had to wait, gather greater force, and bring up anti-aircraft artillery. They had to do this quietly, make fresh plans, then deliver the major blow that would crush and destroy the Zionists. Orders were given: halt, dig in, and prepare for defense.

BRIGADE headquarters near Rehovot worked feverishly. The Egyptians had to be harried without let-up, given no chance to collect themselves. The commander and his chief of operations pored over maps, battalion commanders came and went, the wireless and telephone functioned without interruption.

That night saw an attack mounted, and the next night and the next. They were slight, mere diversionary actions—an inch here and a dab there. But the enemy became nervous. He wasted vast quantities of ammunition. The sky over his positions was lit up constantly with red and green Very lights. All his weapons went into action at the faintest rustle in the fields. He got little rest.

IT WAS JUNE 4, 1948. From every part of the wide South fighting units came up

to mass at Gan Yavneh and Bitzaron over against the Egyptian concentration. Tonight they were due to strike a heavy blow at Isdud. It was a daring gamble, for large areas had been left without adequate defense in order to permit this concentration. The Egyptians could bring three to five heavy machine guns into action against every Bren gun of the Israelis. And the Israeli commander was also aware that his communications system was not yet adequate to an operation involving as many as five battalions. Once they were engaged there would be no communication between the separate units.

Yet there was no alternative. It goes against all the laws of strategy, and still it is correct, that if you lack the strength to withstand the enemy's attack, then attack him, hit him, shake him up, mislead him, give him no opportunity to group his forces and prepare an attack. This is an expensive tactic. Yet it was the only one that could save the South and Tel Aviv.

The first news came in bit by bit. The operation had failed. The attack had been repelled at every point, with numerous, very numerous losses. Yet one thing was clear: the enemy had been impressed. He would not move easily.

NOW an intellectual and moral wrestling match began between the Israeli and Egyptian commanders, with the arena the coastal plain, the Biblical land of Philistia. At headquarters near Rehovot blue-gray eyes, calculating and planning, concentrated on the map. In one of the houses in Mejdal a similar map was being studied by the brown eyes of the Egyptian commander.

The problem for the Israeli was how to prevent the Egyptian from breaking through to the north, towards Tel Aviv, when there was no force capable of holding off his armor, planes, and artillery. The only answer was to try to shake his psychological equilibrium. His lines of communications and supplies had to be threatened.

About three kilometers south of Isdud, between Beer Tuvia and Nizanim, there

was a height marked by the number 69 on the map. It was low, bald, and surmounted by three water towers constructed by the English during the big war. This hill dominated the highroad between the Egyptian concentration at Isdud and the base at Mejdal. On the 7th of June, two days after the battle of Isdud, a small Jewish force proceeded to Hill 69 by night and dug itself in.

The Egyptian felt the menace and prepared to hit back. Two days later, at dawn, he flung his concentrated might against the hill. For the first time a Jewish strongpoint was subjected to the simultaneous attack of all the forms of modern armament—artillery bombardment, bombing from the air, the weight of heavy motorized armor. The Jews stood up bravely but at the crucial moment the weakest link in their chain broke; the spirit of one man in a responsible position failed him. The defense collapsed, and Hill 69 fell into the hands of the enemy. The Egyptian had won the second round.

AT BRIGADE headquarters the report came like a bolt from the blue. For a moment there was a state of general stupefaction. Everybody had been sure that the hill would hold out. By all military calculation it had to hold out—and still it had fallen.

They all saw just one fact. In the first contest between Jewish men and Egyptian steel, the steel had won the victory. Was the spirit really unable to stand up to the material? Were they wrong, all those who had hoped that the fighting man would beat the fighting machine?

Meanwhile, if the Egyptians continued to advance towards Beer Tuvia, they would break the front. And there were no reserves to stop them. So if they were not stopped before Beer Tuvia, the South would fall and Tel Aviv with it.

The whole area held by the brigade had been virtually denuded of troops. The Arab Legion, aided by local irregulars, had taken Gezer to the east. The kibbutzim of Gath and Galon were holding out by a sheer miracle, with the help of hardly a single regular soldier. All forces were concentrated

against the Egyptians in the Isdud-Hill 69 sector—and there were no reserves.

Count Bernadotte, the mediator appointed by the UN, had issued a cease-fire order to take effect the next day. But would the Egyptians honor it if they realized that a single additional blow would suffice to settle the fate of Israel?

Little by little the dreadful day passed, each second an eternity. The commander himself went to Beer Tuvia. The third and decisive round was beginning.

There were two Jewish companies at Beit Daras, between Beer Tuvia and Hill 69. One of them was moving toward the hill to cover the retreat of its defenders. It reached the edge of an orange grove about two hundred meters from the height and dug in. There were one Piat, three Bren guns, and eighty Jews to defend the land of Israel. Meanwhile, the Egyptians occupied the hill, and their advance force of tanks moved ahead towards Beit Daras. All of a sudden they were met by unexpected fire from an orange grove. Three Piat shells hit a tank, but failed to explode. Bren-gun bullets scratched the armor. The tanks halted, and wirelessly headquarters; the Egyptian commander there thought for a few moments, then ordered them to return to Hill 69 and dig in there.

The Jewish commander immediately exploited this miracle by striking a second blow just as the Egyptians began to show signs of renewed movement. A small force of jeeps and half-tracks of the Palmach commandos in the Negev moved toward the hill, fired a few rounds and withdrew. The Egyptians halted again. The Jews had won the third round. Then Bernadotte's cease-fire came into effect.

THE truce was not a restful period. Both sides feverishly prepared for the decisive second stage, both studied the lessons of the first battle, drew their conclusions, and corrected their errors. The Egyptians further increased their forces and, in despair of breaking through in the Isdud sector, shifted their main force southward. There they

made ready for the decisive, all-out attack.

The Jewish commander reviewed his forces, knowing that the next struggle would be an even harder one and that he would still have to fight without reserves, and still have at his disposal only those same five infantry battalions supplemented by a few obsolete cannons. He would have no fighter planes and no tanks. Benefiting by his experience of the Isdud battle, he set up a combat headquarters that was to travel with the forward troops and direct their movements on the battlefield, coordinating their action and keeping it under control at every stage. The units received further training, and positions were fortified.

THE first blow came from an unexpected quarter. News arrived that some of the settlers in the South were preparing to flee their villages. Down in the plain there were no illusions. The inhabitants of Gan Yavneh, Beer Tuvia, and Negba knew the real state of affairs. They knew that tanks had defeated men in the battle for Hill 69. They knew that the force left to hold their homes was exceedingly small, and without reserves, and would have to hold out on its own. Moreover, they were tired. Ever since the Egyptian invasion they had been toiling incessantly at fortifications and at the same time trying their best to keep their farms running. Not only had the army not fed them, it had even requisitioned part of their food. At Gan Yavneh almost all the houses had been hit by Egyptian batteries firing from only a mile and a quarter away. And now they were faced with the prospect of being directly attacked in full force.

The local village commanders requested the brigade commander to come down and persuade the settlers to stay. He believed that his army would be unable to hold out anywhere without close contact with the population. And he knew that the civilians had to remain in their homes of their own free will, not under duress.

The commander went from place to place, talking everywhere. He made no promises, pledged no reinforcements, no supply of

non-existent heavy weapons. He promised only one thing—that his men and officers would hold out to the last. The settlers listened to him, and resolved to stay put, together with the soldiers.

ON JULY 8, with the dawn, thirty hours before the end of the truce, the Egyptians attacked Beit Daras. A picked company of Sudanese broke into the Israeli positions, were met in hand-to-hand combat—and stopped. There were dozens of casualties on both sides. The enemy drew off.

The commander and his second-in-command were at the new combat headquarters near Kfar Warburg. There they decided to counterattack at once, on the same day, to forestall the Egyptian and knock him off balance. That night, the same 8th of July, part of the brigade force feinted attacks at Height 113, Khartieh, and Hata, while the rest assaulted and took the villages of Iraq Sueidan, Beit Afa, and Ibdis in the Negba expanse.

A Palmach unit went into action against the police station outside Iraq Sueidan, a terrifying fortress that dominated the whole south. But the attack failed, and early in the morning the Israelis had to withdraw from Iraq Sueidan itself and from Beit Afa too, neither of which could be held as long as the police station remained in the hands of the enemy. But the Ibdis strongpoint near Negba stayed in the brigade's possession.

Now it was the enemy's turn. He moved out of the Iraq Sueidan police station in tremendous force and launched himself against Negba and Ibdis. At the latter place the troops had not had enough time to reorganize and dig in properly, since its capture had been completed only at eleven that morning, when the Egyptians' final preparations for their counterattack were already to be observed in the distance.

The original intentions of the Egyptians had been quite clear, even without the benefit of a battle order of theirs that had fallen into the hands of the Jews when they took Ibdis. This order had envisaged a pincers movement, with an Egyptian column pierc-

ing the front near Beit Daras and then uniting in the plain with a second Egyptian column that was to push its way through the Negba-Ibdis sector. The success of this double movement would have caused the Jewish front to collapse entirely and leave the whole coastal plain open as far as Tel Aviv. The repulse of the Egyptians at Beit Daras and, coming on the night of the same day, the Jewish attack in the Negba area, had ruined the whole plan. But, relying on their tremendous superiority in weapons and reserves, the Egyptians were ready to come back to the attack again and again. And they did.

The battle for Ibdis and Negba raged four days and nights. It has no parallel in the entire history of the Palestinian war. And it determined the fate of Tel Aviv. On the second day the entire Jewish front was subjected to a terrible shelling, followed by an all-out assault on Ibdis. The Egyptians attacked eight times that day. First artillery, mortars, and fighter planes went into action; then came tanks followed by line upon line of infantry. They were beaten back each time.

From noon on a stream of wounded descended constantly from the strongpoint, the company commander among them. Another commander was dispatched to replace him, but the wireless from Ibdis reported that the soldiers and platoon commanders felt they would be able to manage without him.

By evening all that was left of the company defending Ibdis was less than a single platoon. Another unit was sent to relieve it and risk the same fate. But headquarters was worried. There were no reserves to cover such losses.

During the night settlers turned up at Ibdis, in the midst of the ceaseless bombardment, to dig foxholes for the troops. Both civilians and soldiers were dead tired, and both knew that they would have to fight next day and the day after, and the day after that as well.

THE battle went on, and Negba and Ibdis held out. On the fourth day the weary

Egyptians made one last all-out attack. One road led to Negba, and the entire front depended upon it. From a distance the Iraq Sueidan police fortress dominated a part of this road, where it passed under a tiny hillock that bore the number 105 on the map. On the fourth day the Egyptians took Hill 105 and dug in. Negba was cut off.

It was the Hill 69 business all over again, but with the roles reversed. The brigade commander realized that he had no choice, but had to make a direct frontal attack. No maneuvers would help here. The blow would have to be struck at the enemy precisely where he was expecting it. One detachment of infantry and two platoons of commandos mounted on jeeps were ordered to the attack. They were told to take the hillock "at all costs"—words whose meaning is terrible at the front.

In the dark of night on the 12th of July the attacking force approached Hill 105, the infantry clambering through the dark, followed by the jeeps, which opened fire immediately. A sudden panic seized the Egyptians and they fled for their lives, leaving behind them cannons, Bren carriers, Piats, machine guns, ammunition, and dead.

Next day the enemy's artillery was silent along the entire front. Without understanding what had happened, everybody from Galon to Julia realized that there had been a change. Something big had happened.

IT WAS possible to rest, and rest was needed. Not a platoon was fit for action. But the commander, the weariest of them all, sensed that this moment had to be seized and the enemy attacked without let-up in order to deprive them of the chance to regroup and recover from the blow. His tired battalion commanders agreed.

On July 13, at six in the evening, an infantry company that had seen action for five consecutive nights, and which only the night before had participated in the capture of Hill 105, attacked Beit Afa. With that the initiative on the southern front passed once and for all into Jewish hands. Tel Aviv was saved, and the State of Israel with it.